BACKGROUND-

Learning From Stories

When Europeans first arrived in North America, well over 300 different languages were spoken by the people who lived here. Like languages elsewhere in the world, North American Native languages can be grouped into families which share various characteristics. Passamaquoddy is a member of a large family of languages referred to as Algonquian. Algonquian speakers range from the dawnland of the northeast, south to the Carolinas and west to the Great Plains. Besides Passamaquoddy, Algonquian languages include Cree, Ojibwa, Shawnee, Arapaho, Cheyenne and many more.

Linguists hypothesize that all Algonquian languages share a common ancestor called "Proto-Algonquian," which probably dates to 4,000 years before present. Dialects developed within this large group, and isolation may have caused these dialects to eventually differentiate into separate languages. Some time around 3,500 to 3,800 years ago, Iroquoian speaking people moved into an area west of present-day New England, cutting Algonquian speakers in this part of the continent off from those on the Great Plains. These Iroquoian speakers developed into tribes like the Mohawk, Huron, Seneca and Tuscarora, among others. Iroquoian languages are not related to Algonquian at all, and they are not mutually understandable.

Beginning about 2,000 years ago, the isolation of the Eastern Algonquian languages led to the development of the languages of the Wabanaki tribes of today. In Maine, these include Penobscot, Passamaquoddy, Maliseet and Micmac. Passamaquoddy and Maliseet are very closely related, and many linguists consider them dialects of the same language and refer to them as Maliseet-Passamaquoddy. They have been compared to British and American English, differing slightly in vocabulary, pronunciation and accent, but easily mutually understood. Penobscot, while related, is more distant, and Micmac is more distant still. While a Passamaquoddy speaker could carry on a conversation with a Maliseet speaker with little difficulty, they probably could not converse easily with a Micmac speaker.

Algonquian languages are structured differently from English. Maliseet-Passamaquoddy has many of the same parts of speech as English—nouns, verbs, pronouns and conjunctions—but the modifying words that English-speakers consider adjectives, including possessives, are built into the nouns and verbs. This means that one word in Passamaquoddy may contain as much information as a whole sentence in English. This makes for a language of great flexibility, one where words are continually "invented" by combining elements in new ways. Madonna Soctomah, who lives and teaches Passamaquoddy at Sipayik, the Passamaquoddy Reservation at Pleasant Point, talks about the challenges her students set for her each class, asking her to use the traditional language to convey modern ideas like checking accounts, or dog treats, a challenge the language readily meets.

In addition to being structurally different from English, Passamaquoddy nouns are all either "animate" or "inanimate." This is somewhat like the gender of French nouns, and as in French, the "gender" of Passamaquoddy nouns is not always obvious. Some are easy–nouns referring to people and animals are animate. But while 'star,' 'mountain' and 'tree' are all animate nouns, the words for 'earth,' 'river' and 'flower' are inanimate. Some rocks, but certainly not all, are animate. As with French, the reason for these distinctions is lost in time, and Native Passamaquoddy speakers just know that the words for 'milk' and 'shoe' are animate while those for 'water' and 'sock' are not.

Passamaquoddy verbs are also different from English verbs. Like nouns, they may be animate or inanimate, with different forms of the verb depending on whether the object is animate or inanimate. While English verbs are singular or plural, Passamaquoddy verbs have forms that indicate specific numbers–not just "one" or "more than one."

And there are words in Passamaquoddy that have no English equivalent. "Nekom," for example, means "he" or "she," without specifying gender. This avoids the problems that arise in English where you either need to use "he" when referring to people of both sexes (and risk offending half your listeners) or resort to "them," which is usually grammatically incorrect.

Language, and the structure of language, determines how we perceive and think about the world around us, and we can use language as one way of attempting to understand another culture. Many words that are nouns in English, like 'wind,' 'storm,' 'snow,' 'rain,' and even 'moon,' are verbs in Passamaquoddy, as are time words, like 'day' and 'year.' They are processes rather than things. Shapes and colors are inherent characteristics of objects and so are parts of nouns naming those objects rather than adjectives describing them. One final example – in Passamaquoddy there is no real distinction between teaching and learning, and to learn is to teach oneself.

Robert Leavitt, who worked with David A. Francis on the Maliseet-Passamaquoddy dictionary and who is the Director of the Mi'kmaq-Maliseet Institute at the University of New Brunswick, holds that language even influences the organization of how we think:

> *Native languages do not necessarily organize their reasoning according to a linear sequence of causes-and-effects or evidence-and-conclusions, as do speakers of European languages. Instead, they may keep a number of related ideas in mind, without putting them in a fixed order....To European-language thinkers this approach may seem scattered and unfocused. Native-language thinkers, on the other hand, may find the linear way of thinking rigid and narrow. They commonly approach an idea or a topic from many different angles at once, thinking in a circle rather than a line.* (Leavitt, 1995, p. 6.)

When Europeans first arrived in the New World, none of the Wabanaki languages were

written. Since then, orthographies (systems for writing language) have been developed for all currently spoken Algonquian languages. There is one alphabet used to write Penobscot, one for Maliseet-Passamaquoddy, and three different systems used to write Micmac. The Maliseet-Passamaquoddy alphabet uses seventeen English letters (five vowels and twelve consonants), but the letters do not necessarily represent the same sound values as in English. People like David Francis at Sipayik and Wayne Newell at Motahkomikuk, the Passamaquoddy Reservation at Indian Township, have been instrumental in developing these orthographies and in keeping the Passamaquoddy language alive. Today, there are about 1,500 people who speak Maliseet-Passamaquoddy.

Until recently when Passamaquoddy and the other Wabanaki languages were first written down, knowledge and beliefs were passed from generation to generation entirely by oral tradition. People who do not rely on written records develop ways of keeping their oral tradition accurate. Special occasions during the year may require specific stories or recitations of historic events. In the old days, family trees were recited at Micmac and Maliseet funerals and weddings. Formulas and ritual phrases developed to help people remember. Charles Leland, who collected many Wabanaki stories in the late 1800s, reported that his older informants told him that all the stories were originally poems and were sung.

Stories are an important part of this oral tradition. Micmac stories frequently begin with the ritual phrase, "The Old People are encamped...." Many stories are now written down, but storytelling is inherently different than reading. It requires an interaction between the teller and the listeners, while reading is an essentially solitary activity. Some contemporary Native American storytellers deliberately will not write down certain parts of their stories, believing that to do so will lessen the value of the oral tradition. Linguists also value old stories—many older stories use language less influenced by European culture than everyday speech and so are a rich source of vocabulary and traditional language.

Many stories were told at certain times, usually only in the winter or only at night. The Klouscap stories were meant to be told only after the first frost of autumn and before the last frost of spring. Other stories, drawn from personal experience and frequently funny, were told at any time of the year. Many of the traditional stories are considered sacred, but are frequently also humorous.

Stories are more than just stories. They explain the world around us–how turtle got his hard shell, or how the seasons came to be. Most importantly, they teach people the values of their culture and how to behave well within that culture. And finally, stories are for entertainment. There is a Cree saying that "the good story is the one that lets you live in winter."

Wabanaki stories may seem strange to English speakers. Part of this is undoubtedly due

to language–much subtlety and nuance is lost in translation. But the structure of these stories is also different. Many are long cycles of stories without an obvious beginning, middle or end. Episodes may be moved around between or within stories, depending on the point the storyteller wants to emphasize. Characters in Wabanaki stories frequently change shapes, and the shape of the stories themselves changes with each telling. The same story may well be told differently on different occasions, changed to suit the circumstances and the audience. And characters in these stories are rarely "good" or "bad" in the European sense. In the space of a story, the same character may be both foolish and wise.

Many Native American story traditions involve a character known as the trickster, who is usually both sacred and foolish. Tricksters are frequently shape changers, and often are involved in shaping the earth and its inhabitants. In the American West, this is usually coyote, on the Northwest Coast it is raven, and in Wabanaki stories it is sometimes Klouscap, but more often it is Mahtoqehs, the hare. In some stories he is the trickster, deceiving bear or wildcat or wolf and leaving them looking foolish. In other stories, Mahtoqehs is the foolish one, losing his tail by trying to use it to fish through the ice, and so explaining why hares have such short tails! By their duel nature, tricksters both teach people how to behave and allow them the vicarious pleasure of behaving badly and breaking cultural taboos.

Perhaps the most well known Wabanaki stories are those involving Klouscap. His name is spelled several ways – **Kčǰsk"pe** in Penobscot, Kluskap in Micmac, and Klouscap or Glooscap in Maliseet-Passamaquoddy. These are sacred stories, but they are not somber or solemn, and while they are told to children, they are not specifically children's stories. Klouscap has magical powers, and has helped to make the world a good place for people to live, making the animals the right size, insuring a supply of fresh water, and regulating the winds and the seasons. But Klouscap also makes mistakes, and he learns the right way to do things from the animal world and from his elders in the form of Grandmother Woodchuck. The Klouscap stories, especially, deal with people's relationship to nature and their place in the world.

Stories are a vital part of the oral tradition, a repository of knowledge and traditional language, and a guide to how to live life. As Abenaki storyteller Joseph Bruchac says, "Our stories remember when people forget."

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Go to: <http://www.pequotmuseum.org/Home/CrossPaths> and check the index or the archived articles.

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